

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6151

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

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AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 0634

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, SY, LE

SUBJECT: EDWARD SAAB COMMENTS ON SYRIAN MEDIATION IN LEBANON AND
DAMASCUS POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE

1. SUMMARY. WELL-KNOWN LEBANESE JOURNALIST BELIEVES
SYRIA'S MEDIATION PROCEEDING WELL IN BEIRUT. PRAISED
CONDUCT OF PLA FORCES. SYRIA SURPRISED TO DISCOVER
DEGREE TO WHICH REJECTIONIST SENTIMENT HAS GROWN IN
PLO MEMBERSHIP RESIDENT LEBANON. DESCRIBES SYRIAN PUBLIC AS
TIRED OF ME CONFLICT AND FRUSTRATED AT LACK OF ANY APPARENT
SOLUTIONS. END SUMMARY.

2. EDWARD SAAB, CORRESPONDENT FOR BEIRUT'S L'ORIENT-
LE JOUR AND PARIS' LE MONDE, WHOSE REPUTATION FOR ACUTE
REPORTING ON LEBANESE AND SYRIAN SCENES WELL-KNOWN TO
ADDRESSEES, CALLED ON AMBASSADOR FEBRUARY 3. SAAB,
HIMSELF OF SYRIAN ORIGIN BUT LONG ESTABLISHED IN BEIRUT,
HAS MAINTAINED GOOD ACCESS TO SYRIAN LEADERSHIP,
IN PARTICULAR TO FONMIN KHADDAM. SAID HIS LAST
CONTACT WITH KHADDAM WAS JANUARY 26 AT LEBANESE
PRESIDENTIAL PALACE WHEN HE FOUND KHADDAM IN
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BUOYANT MOOD AND CONFIDENT THAT SYRIAN MEDIATION

WOULD BE RAPIDLY SUCCESSFUL. SAAB BELIEVES THAT KHADDAM HAS BEEN DOING REMARKABLE JOB IN GETTING MESSAGE ACROSS TO ALL LEBANESE FACTIONS THAT THEY MUST NOW FACE FACTS AND COMPROMISE FOR SAKE OF PEACE. SAAB ADMIRINGLY DESCRIBED KHADDAM AS USING "MOST UNDIPLOMATICALLY POINTED LANGUAGE" WITH LEBANESE. FONMIN WAS EFFECTIVELY QUOTING BACK TO EACH INTERLOCUTOR HIS EARLIER BRAVADO THAT HIS GROUP COULD MOP UP ITS RESPECTIVE OPPOSITION "IN MATTER OF WEEKS."

3. SAAB DISCOVERED DURING PRESENT STAY IN DAMASCUS THAT BOTH REGIONAL AND NATIONAL COMMANDS OF BAATH PARTY HAD BEEN ASKED TO VOTE ON PRESIDENTIAL INTENTION TO COMMIT PLA FORCES TO LEBANON AND HAD APPROVED IDEA UNANIMOUSLY. PLA, ACCORDING TO SAAB'S INFORMATION, AT NO POINT DIRECTLY ENGAGED LEBANESE ARMY IN COMBAT. LEBANESE MILITARY EFFECTED TACTICAL RETREAT WHENEVER PLA UNIT APPROACHED. SAAB FURTHER COMMENTED THAT LEBANESE ARMY HAD DISINTEGRATED, PERHAPS FIRST TIME IN HISTORY ANY ARMY HAD DONE SO WITHOUT BEING BLOODIED IN COMBAT. HE WAS HIGH IN PRAISE OF OBJECTIVITY OF PLA OFFICERS IN BEIRUT, SOME OF WHOM HE IS CONVINCED ARE SYRIANS.

4. BAATH REGIONAL COMMAND, ACCORDING TO SAAB, HAD BEEN SHAKEN BY ONE FACTOR IN LEBANESE SITUATION WHICH HAD NOT BEEN SO WIDELY APPRECIATED BEFORE IN DAMASCUS: THE GROWTH OF REJECTIONIST SENTIMENT WITHIN PLO RANKS, PARTICULARLY FATEH. CONTACTS IN COURSE OF DUTY BY SIXTY SYRIAN OFFICERS SENT TO PARTICIPATE IN PEACE-KEEPING BUSINESS HAD FURTHER BROADENED SYRIAN UNDERSTANDING OF PALESTINIAN ATTITUDES. SAAB DID NOT BELIEVE THIS REJECTIONIST SENTIMENT HAD LEAD MANY PALESTINIANS FORMALLY TO ADHERE TO THE EXISTING "REJECTIONIST FRONT" ORGANIZATIONS, BUT SAID IT WAS APPARENT THAT OPPOSITION TO PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT WITH ISRAEL HAD GROWN DRAMATICALLY WITHIN PLO. THIS TREND, EXTENDING BACK OVER PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, HAD BEEN ACCELERATED BY RECENT US VETO AT SC. SAAB COMMENTED RUEFULLY THAT "NEGATIVISM" HAD

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HISTORICALLY BEEN PALESTINIANS' OUTSTANDING CHARACTERISTIC. MANY PALESTINIANS, HE COMMENTED, IN VIEW OF THEIR PRESENT STRENGTH, WOULD BE UNWILLING TO RETURN TO RESTRICTIONS ON THEIR ACTIVITIES AS SET FORTH IN CAIRO AND MELKART AGREEMENTS. LIKEWISE, HE WAS NOT SURPRISED THAT FRANJIEH VISIT TO DAMASCUS HAD BEEN SEVERAL TIMES POSTPONED.

5. DAMASCUS, SAAB CONSIDERED, WAS THE ONLY ARAB CAPITAL NOT TO HAVE BENEFITTED BY THE LEBANESE CRISIS IN TERMS OF BECOMING HEADQUARTERS FOR ANY OF THE MANY FOREIGN BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENTS WHICH HAVE EVACUATED BEIRUT.

6. THE SYRIAN PUBLIC, SAAB ASSERTED, IS TIRED OF M.E. CONFLICT AND FRUSTRATED THAT THERE SEEMS TO BE NO END IN SEARCH FOR AN ARAB-ISRAELI SOLUTION. HE DETECTED NO SPIRIT FOR ADVENTURISM AGAINST ISRAEL IN OFFICIAL CIRCLES. HE PREDICTED THIS WOULD BE LIKELY TO DEVELOP ONLY IF SADAT SHOULD TRY TO TAKE A FURTHER DISENGAGEMENT STEP INDEPENDENT OF THE OTHER ARAB STATES.

7. HE FURTHER NOTED THAT DAMASCUS TODAY STRIKES HIM AS BEING AT LOWEST EBB OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN MANY YEARS. HIS JOURNALIST COLLEAGUES, INCLUDING MANY BAATH PARTY MEMBERS, OPENLY EXPRESSED TO HIM THEIR UNHAPPINESS THAT REGIME WAS NOT MORE QUICKLY EXTENDING POLITICAL FREEDOMS, INCLUDING THAT FOR THE PRESS. "OF COURSE, EARLIER GIFTS OF FREEDOM HAVE ONLY WHETTED THEIR APPETITES FOR MORE"; NO ONE DENIES, HE ADDED, THAT PRESENT DAY SYRIA IS POLITICALLY FAR MORE TOLERANT ENVIRONMENT THAN IN THE 1960S.

8. FINALLY, HE NOTED, THE LEBANESE CRISIS WILL NECESSARILY PREOCCUPY SYRIAN LEADERSHIP FOR SOME TIME TO COME. SAAB, WHO PERSONALLY CONSIDERS ALL ROADS TOWARDS A M.E. SETTLEMENT BLOCKED FOR THIS YEAR, BELIEVES THAT SYRIAN ABSORPTION IN ENSURING THAT LEBANESE SETTLEMENT HOLDS COULD SERVE AS A HANDY EXCUSE FOR SARG IF IT ALSO CONCLUDES THAT 1976 WILL PRODUCE

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NO SIGNIFICANT MOVEMENT TOWARD AN ARAB-ISRAELI SOLUTION.
MURPHY

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